


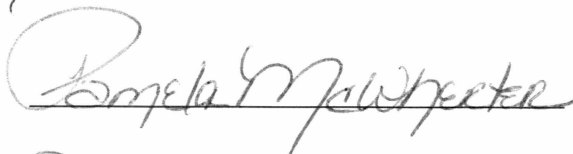
I HAVE A SECRET: CHOOSING THE PERSONS TO WHOM SECRETS ARE
REVEALED

By

Natavan Ahmadova

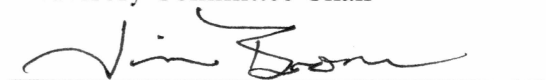
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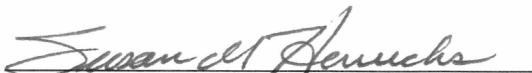


Chair, Department of Communication

APPROVED:



Dean, College of Liberal Arts



Dean of the Graduate School



Date

I HAVE A SECRET: CHOOSING THE PERSONS TO WHOM SECRETS ARE
REVEALED

A
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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By
Natavan Ahmadova, B.A.

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Abstract

This Human Science research on secrecy is focused on the choices individuals make in choosing with whom they will share a secret. Specifically, this research probes the lived experience of women regarding their decision making about secret sharing and about choosing a person with whom to share a secret. In-depth, conversational interviews were conducted with five women. Narrative analysis was used to interpret the data, resulting in three main themes. The findings show that characteristics such as trusting the potential secret keeper, predicting their possible reaction, and what benefits might be derived from self-disclosure are important for the participants in choosing to whom they will reveal secrets.

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Chapter 1:

Review of Related Literature

Reveal not every secret you have to a friend,
For how can you tell but that friend may hereafter become an enemy.
And bring not all mischief you are able to upon an enemy,
For he may one day become your friend.
(Saadi Shirazi, Persian poet)

1.1 Introduction and Statement of Problem

The story of Samson and Delilah is one of the most well known stories of trust and betrayal. This legend is the quintessential tale of a “bad” self-disclosure decision. Samson was prohibited by his God to cut his hair or he would lose his superhuman strength. However, when Samson fell in love with Delilah, a Philistine woman, he chose to share this secret with her. Samson became a victim of his own naiveté. The consequences of sharing his secret with Delilah were horrible for Samson and for the 3000 people whom he killed.

Because U.S. American culture is Judeo-Christian based, the story of Samson and Delilah is familiar to the majority of the population. Does the story teach a lesson to those who have wanted to share a secret? Does the story make people think twice before sharing a secret? Do people identify with Samson who lost his life, dignity, and love for sharing a secret with the wrong person? If Samson had not shared his secret with Delilah, would he have lived and prospered?

I share Benjamin Franklin's philosophy that "Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead." From my perspective one should never share a secret. I do not share secrets so that I do not have to worry about negative consequences. Such behavior gives me peace of mind. I do not see any advantages to sharing secrets, and do not believe that it can give a person relief. To understand other points of view regarding secrecy and secret sharing I would like to know what others experience when they make decisions about secret sharing. How one evaluates another person as a possible secret keeper and what characteristics are important for us when choosing that person are the focus of this study. The concern here is not to learn the nature of participants' secrets, but rather to seek a better understanding of the lived experience of participants when they choose possible secret keepers.

Everyday communication among human beings is based on sharing of information. Georg Simmel (Wolff, 1950), a pioneer in the field of sociology and interpersonal relationships, stated that, "Obviously, all relations which people have one to another are based on their knowing something about one another" (p. 307). Relationships involve a constant exchange of information. One dimension of this information sharing is secrets. According to Bok (1984), secrets are part of our mundane lives: "Secrecy is as indispensable to human beings as fire, and as greatly feared. Both enhance and protect life, yet both can stifle, lay waste, spread out of all control" (p. 18). We know many different things about our personalities, our private lives, our families, coworkers, and sometimes we are eager to keep this information secret. Vrij et al. (2002) see disapproval as a reason to keep secrets and explain this by relating secrets to taboos or rule violations

(p. 57). But secrets are also dialectic – despite being kept, secrets are disclosed. There are many reasons why human beings experience the need to disclose; some people look for advice, some seek emotional or psychological relief. Studies in the area of secrecy have shown that people who share their secrets benefit both mentally and physically. Kelly (1999) notes that revealing personal secrets leads to health benefits (p. 107), and may be beneficial because the secret owner can gain new insights and perspectives on the secret (p. 106).

The process of sharing secrets is very complex and is affected by many variables. The nature of the secret, of the secret owner, of the potential secret keeper, and of the context are all important factors when one makes the decision to reveal a secret. This study is interested neither in the reasons *why* people disclose, nor in the nature of secrets, but in *how* people choose to whom they can tell a secret. The purpose of this research is to understand the lived experience of the participants when choosing a potential secret keeper and what kind of characteristics of others or of the event are important for a secret owner in making a decision to disclose. This chapter reviews scientific articles, texts, and other related literature that serve as a departure point for this research.

1.2 The Concepts of Secrecy and Privacy

Secrets are a very broad notion. People consider different types of information as secrets. Simmel (Wolff, 1950) characterized a secret as, “The hiding of realities by negative or positive means,” and noted that doing so “is one of man’s [sic] greatest achievements” (p. 330). Simmel describes origins of secrecy, both for positive secrets, such as modesty, and for negative ones, such as shame. It appears that he saw secrets as

negative phenomena: “Among other things, the secret is also the sociological expression of moral badness, although the facts contradict the classical phrase that nobody is bad enough to want, in addition, to *appear* bad” (p. 331). Simmel identified three positions that accompany secrecy; first, the sense of possession: “The strongly emphasized exclusion of all outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong feeling of possession;” second, the sense of exception: “The secret gives one a position of exception; it operates as a purely socially determined attraction;” and third, the mistaken sense of mystery and enigma: “From secrecy, which shades all that is profound and significant, grows the typical error according to which everything mysterious is something important and essential” (pp. 32-33). Secrets also involve the fascination of betrayal. Simmel suggests, “The secret is surrounded by the possibility and temptation of betrayal; and the external danger of being discovered is interwoven with the internal danger, which is like the fascination of an abyss, of giving oneself away” (p. 334). Simmel’s thoughts that secrets are negative phenomena reflect the conservative influence of the church, which disapproved of anything hidden, particularly secrets.

According to Bok (1984) the notions of secrecy and privacy are often confused. The author defines secrecy as intentional concealment: “Anything can be secret so long as it is kept intentionally hidden” (p. 5). Bok argues that people see secrecy as purposeful suppression of information, and that information remains secret as long as it is kept from other people. She implies that revealed information is no longer secret.

Bok (1984) defines privacy as, “The condition of being protected from unwanted access by others – either physical access, personal information, or attention. Claims to

privacy are claims to control access to what one takes – however grandiosely – to be one’s personal domain” (p. 11). The author gives examples of different cultures that “developed strict etiquette, along with means of dissimulation and hypocrisy that allow certain private matters to remain unknown or go unobserved” (p. 12). Bok argues that the concept of secrecy “hides far more than what is private,” and explains this using the metaphor that “A private garden need not be a secret garden; a private life is rarely a secret life” (p. 11).

As seen from Bok’s (1984) definition, there is a major gap between secrecy and privacy. Going beyond theoretical definitions and drawing on mundane, everyday life, I see another dimension of difference between the two notions. Private information does not beget the unhealthy interest of others. When one hears the words “It is my private life” or “This is private information,” what does one usually think? Such privacy may hide one’s Social Security number, or a credit card number, something that is insignificant and uninteresting to others. In contrast, what does one do upon hearing the word “secret” in any context? One may fabricate various questions to try to uncover the secret. Sometimes knowledge that there is a secret can affect the communication between the secret owner and others. People associate secrets with something that hides dark, past experience, such as murder, rape, incest, or other negative issues. From my perspective, the level of significance of the information is one of the most important differences between secrecy and privacy.

1.3 Theoretical Background.

1.3.1 Communication Privacy Management Theory. Contrary to Bok (1984), Petronio (2002) defines secrecy not only as intentional concealment, but also as intentional revelation of information, or in other words, secret owners manage degrees of both openness and closedness about information. It is the secret owner who decides what to do with his/her secret – either to conceal it, or reveal it. If the secret owner decides to reveal it, then s/he also decides how much information to reveal. Petronio states that the secret owner is free to establish the boundaries of privacy, and provides “Theoretical approach that gives us a rule-based system to examine the way people make decisions about balancing disclosure and privacy” (p. 2). Petronio states:

The theory of Communication Privacy Management (CPM) represents a map that presumes private disclosures are dialectical, that people make choices about revealing or concealing based on criteria and conditions they perceive as salient, and that individuals fundamentally believe they have a right to own and regulate access to their private information. (p. 2)

Petronio’s (2002) CPM Theory describes the system persons use for coordinating and controlling privacy boundaries. In describing CPM Theory I will provide examples from my own experience. CPM Theory consists of five theoretical suppositions – private information, privacy boundaries, control and ownership, rule-based management system (which is composed of privacy rule development and privacy rule attributes), and privacy management dialectics. By *private information* Petronio means personal information we disclose. She argues that self-disclosure and intimacy are different concepts, and that self-

disclosure does not necessarily lead to intimacy. Petronio defines intimacy as “the feeling or state of knowing someone deeply in physical, psychological, emotional, and behavioral ways because that person is significant in one’s life,” whereas private disclosure is the “*process* of telling and reflects the *content* of private information about others and us” (p. 6). If someone self-discloses to a totally unfamiliar person on a plane or in a train, the act involves private disclosure, but has nothing to do with intimacy. I define everything that is connected to my private life, my health, my future opportunities, and my problems as private information. When I had major health problems, I tried to keep this information closed, or when I got accepted into the MBA program, I preferred not to tell this to just anyone.

Privacy boundaries exist in two types – personal and collective. Personal privacy boundaries manage information about self, while collective privacy boundaries manage information with others. In other words, personal privacy boundaries are controlled by the owner of the information. Collective privacy boundaries regard shared information and are harder to control, because the information belongs to at least two persons. Privacy boundaries change through the life of a person, and Petronio (2002) argues that boundaries begin to increase beginning from childhood through adulthood, and begin to shrink when a person gets older (pp. 7-8). When I was faced with a health problem two years ago, no one except my family members knew my problem, but as time passed and my health condition became better, this issue was no longer secret, and I shared it with my friends and co-workers. Through my personal privacy boundaries I could protect this information from my friends and acquaintances, but I could not manage this information

within collective privacy boundaries because doctors and staff at the hospital were talking about it, violating ethical considerations. I was helpless to regulate and control collective privacy boundaries.

The *control and ownership* supposition describes people's desire to control private information. Petronio (2002) notes that because people have their own private information, they want to control it and make decisions about what information to reveal and what information to conceal (p. 9). One feels violated if someone gets access to one's personal information without permission. To avoid these situations people create their own rules to control private information. To protect my personal information from undesired revelation, I usually do not share it, or I directly ask the person I share my information with to keep it secret. I also explain that I do not want that piece of information to go outside. If I need to have maximum control and ownership of the private information I share it with no one, and thus minimize my worries about outsiders violating my private information.

The *rule-based management system* supposition focuses on how people handle private information and the kinds of rules they use. Privacy rule management consists of three processes: *management process 1*: privacy rule foundations; *management process 2*: boundary coordination operations; and *management process 3*: boundary turbulence (Petronio, 2002). *Management process 1*, or privacy rule foundations, concerns both the development and the attributes of rules. According to Petronio, privacy rule development depends on five criteria – cultural, gendered, motivational, contextual, and risk-benefit. One creates different rules according to one's own criteria. The culture one

lives in has an influence and develops norms for privacy, openness, and closedness. In some cultures openness is a positive characteristic and people tend to be open and discuss many different issues, whereas in other cultures people tend to be more reticent. Being an international student in the U.S., I have noticed Americans are open on issues about which a typical Eastern person would be ashamed or would feel guilty. Difference in cultures has an imprint on people's perspective on openness and closedness. Views on privacy vary not only across ethnicities and larger cultural groups, but also from family to family. In other words, one's comprehension of privacy is also formed under the influence of one's family.

Another criterion, gender, also affects rules about privacy, in that as West and Turner (2007) state, "men and women seem to be socialized to develop different rules for how privacy and disclosure operate" (p. 249). Motivation is another important criterion when one makes decision about managing privacy boundaries. There are many reasons why people disclose: some people look for advice, some people look for approval, some people practice disclosures to develop relationships, some people try to get new insights on their private information, etc. Petronio (2002) states that, "In addition to culture, gender, and motivation, the context of the situation may function as a critical element in formulating rules that regulate revealing and concealing" (p. 25). The last criterion risk-benefit, reflects the potential risks and benefits one can gain from disclosing. That is, before disclosing one evaluates if disclosing is risky or beneficial.

Being a woman from a high-context, Eastern culture, I have my own perspectives on secret sharing. As a woman I think I am more often involved in secret sharing as a

listener. One major influence on my point of view has been my family. From childhood my mother told me that I should not trust my secrets to anyone besides her, my father, and my brother. She tried to emphasize importance of family linkage and the changeability of other people. When I decide to share personal information, I am usually seeking approval. Perceiving myself to be a weak person, I am afraid to face my mistakes and consciously choose persons who will not judge me, but instead will support me. My decision is also connected with the risk-benefit criterion: my disclosure gives me relief because my listeners approve and support me. Even though I prefer to keep my secret information closed, sometimes due to the context of the situation I disclose, for example, if I am disappointed and need to talk, or I need to get my listener's opinion.

In adding to privacy rule development, Petronio's (2002) privacy rule foundation is privacy rule attributes, which further divide into rule acquisition (how we learn about preexisting rules and create new rules), and rule properties (how stable or changeable rules are). All people are born into cultures with established norms and rules. Members of a culture become familiar with these rules or create new ones due to circumstances. Some of these preexisting and new rules are stable while some are changeable. People also define which rules should remain stable, without any changes, and which rules can be modified. Again, my family taught me that I am not supposed to share my secrets with outsiders. I learned this preexisting rule and it is still active, but one property of this rule has changed – now I can disclose private information if I am sure it will never harm me (as in the case of my health problems).

Management process 2, boundary coordination operations, focuses on how one coordinates personal and collective boundaries. Petronio (2002) notes that, “boundary members regulate private information through rules that moderate boundary *linkage*, boundary *ownership* rights, and boundary *permeability*” (p. 29). Boundary *linkage* refers to connections that form boundary alliances between people (West & Turner, 2007, p. 251). Every person has several boundary linkages. Depending on the boundary linkage, I share different types of private information. For example, the most intimate things I would share with my parents, less intimate matters with my close friends, and general information with my acquaintances. Boundary *ownership* refers to rights and privileges people have regarding private information and consists of three dimensions (p. 30). The first dimension describes how individuals clearly define boundaries of private information with their co-owners. The second dimension suggests that ownership of private information is dynamic, not static. The third dimension “reflects the level of congruity in boundary definitions between co-owners,” and involves the similarity in boundaries of owned private information between co-owners (p. 31). In my family, boundary lines are clearly defined; we never discuss family issues such as communication problems or our financial situation with outsiders. Nevertheless, these boundaries are not static, in that now we discuss our family affairs with my brother’s wife and his in-laws. When my brother got married the rules changed, and now his family is part of our family. All members of our family have a clear understanding of boundary ownership and know what kind of information is supposed to stay inside the family, and which information can be shared with outsiders.

The final element of management process 2 is boundary *permeability*, which reflects the essence of CPM Theory:

People manage varying degrees of revealing and concealing. When boundary access rules are used, they may lead to a range of behaviors, from granting complete access of the private information to only partial disclosure. When boundary protection rules are enacted, individuals may restrict or conceal private information. Levels of boundary permeability therefore range from open access (thin boundaries) to closed access (thick boundaries). (Petronio, 2002, p. 31)

Now that I have been accepted into an MBA program, I decide to whom I want to reveal this information and when to do so. As this piece information is my property, I choose the people whom I allow to share this event.

Management process 3, boundary turbulence, refers to violated expectations about private information boundaries. Petronio (2002) notes, "Because coordination is complex and occurs on multiple levels, people often encounter boundary turbulence" (p. 33). Petronio notes several reasons for boundary turbulence such as intentional rule violation, boundary rule mistakes, fuzzy boundaries, dissimilar boundary orientations, boundary definition predicaments, and privacy dilemmas (p. 177). One of my friends who knew that I was accepted into the MBA program (at the time I was keeping this information secret) unintentionally made an announcement to my other friends. This instance of boundary turbulence happened due to fuzzy boundaries my friend and I had regarding that issue. In other words, I did not clarify to my friend that it was private information, and my friend did not know that it was a secret. The boundary turbulence

was also relevant to cultural differences between my friend and me; in my Azerbaijani culture we often tend to keep closed all information relevant to other people and there is no need to emphasize the secrecy of the information. If someone tells me some private information, it is a cultural norm in my country that the information should not be spread further by me. Because of the cultural rule, people in my country usually do not mention to a secret keeper that the information needs to be kept secret. It is understood to be this way.

The last supposition, *privacy management dialectics*, “focuses on the tensions between the forces advocating for revealing private information and those advocating concealing it” (West & Turner, 2007, p. 247). The dialectical nature of CPM addresses to the contradictory tensions people experience. Every time I share information with another person, this action has a dialectical character – I reveal information but at the same time I conceal information. Even if I share a secret, I still have it. The concept of dialectics is discussed more specifically in relational dialectics.

1.3.2 Relational Dialectics. According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996) dialectics form the basis of all human interaction. Even the process of disclosure seems to be a dialectical action, for when one discloses something, one also hides something. Revealment cannot exist without concealment. Petronio (2002) refers to these contradictory issues in disclosure as concealment and revealment, or openness and closedness. Baxter and Montgomery (1996), the authors of Relational Dialectics Theory, describe three essential elements of these types of dialectics: oppositions, unity of oppositions, and dynamic interplay of oppositions. *Oppositions*, the first element, refers

to opposite and contradictory concepts. The authors prefer to identify oppositions as “logically defined” and/or as “functionally defined” opposites, rather than framing them as “negative” and “positive” oppositions as most previous researchers. Logically defined oppositions employ the particle “not,” for example, the opposite of “loving” is “not loving,” whereas functionally defined oppositions involve opposites in meaning: the functionally defined opposition of “loving” is “hating” (p. 8). Baxter and Montgomery note that functionally defined oppositions are constituted and influenced by “context, culture, and time” (p. 9). That is, functionally defined oppositions change within context and culture, and with time. Functionally defined oppositions usually have several related dialectical oppositions, for instance, love – hatred is related to love – indifference, love – ignorance, love – cruelty, etc. Baxter and Montgomery state that, “Opposition is a necessary but not sufficient condition for contradiction. In addition, the oppositions must simultaneously be unified or interdependent with one another” (p. 9).

In examining the second element of contradictions, *unity of oppositions*.

Thus, Baxter and Montgomery argue that abstract oppositions exist only in pairs: “The concept of ‘certainty,’ for example, is meaningful only because we have an understanding of its logical and/or functional oppositions; without knowledge of ‘uncertainty,’ ‘chaos,’ ‘unpredictability,’ and so forth, the concept of ‘certainty’ would be meaningless” (p. 9). In fact, people understand abstract concepts in comparison to their antonymic definitions. Without contradiction it is impossible to imagine and understand a concept. Both sides of an issue complete and at the same time eliminate each other. The authors rephrase Altman to show two aspects of dialectical unity “first, each oppositional tendency in

social life presupposes the existence of the other for its very meaning” and “second, the oppositional tendencies are unified practically and interactively as interdependent parts of a larger social whole” (as quoted in Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 9). Though oppositions are contradictory in meaning, they depend on each other and cannot exist by themselves. They become meaningful in this oppositional unity. Contrary to dualism, which is not unified but parallel, relational dialectics is unified and connected.

The third element of the meaning of contradiction is the *dynamic interplay of oppositions*. In this element Baxter and Montgomery (1996) refer to the dynamic, rather than static nature of the dialectics, or to the “ongoing dynamic interaction between unified oppositions” (p. 10). Changes in one unity will lead to changes in another unity. Relationships are in motion; they are not static. Sometimes changes happen faster or slower, but there are always dynamics in relationships.

CPM Theory and Relational Dialectics Theory comprise the background for this study and lead to my research question – what characteristics are important in choosing a person to whom to share a secret? I will approach this question by studying the lived experience of my co-researchers regarding their decision making about secret sharing and choosing person with whom to share a secrets.

Chapter 2:

Research Methodology

2.1 Epistemology and Social Constructionism

In conducting this study, I adopted of the Constructionist epistemology. Following Maynard, “Epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (as quoted in Crotty, 2003, p. 8). Crotty describes Constructionism more specifically as the making of meaning: “The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). According to Crotty, “there is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind” (pp. 8-9). More specifically the Social Construction of Reality Theory suggests that the meaning of a phenomenon arises when people begin to interact on the basis of their understandings of a phenomenon, and that they construct their meaning of it through that communication.

The Constructionist epistemology grounds the theoretical perspective of interpretivism. Schwandt (2001) defines interpretivism as denoting “those approaches to studying social life that accord a central place to *verstehen* [understanding] as a method of the human sciences, that assume that the meaning of human action is inherent in that action, and that the task of the inquirer is to unearth that meaning” (p. 134).

Interpretivism is central to this research because I sought to understand the lived experience of the participants, people with several years of life experience beyond their college education, in making decisions and in choosing with whom they will share secrets. I will use meaning structuring through narratives to understand a shared perspective beyond my participants' individual lived experiences.

2.2 Conversational Interviewing Research

This study was accomplished with the use of the conversational interview method for gathering data for further interpretation. Kvale (1996) describes conversational interviewing as interpretation of not only the words of an interviewee, but also of their nonverbal actions: "The interviewer registers and interprets what is said as well as how it is said; he or she must be observant of – and able to interpret – vocalization, facial expressions, and other bodily gestures" (pp. 31-32). Kvale suggests conversational interviewing is a craft, and points out that the three components of this craft are also skills a good researcher should have: "The outcome of an interview depends on the knowledge, sensitivity, and empathy of the interviewer" (p. 105). It is important for me to be knowledgeable of secrecy and privacy in order for me to be able to understand my participants. It is also important that I show my co-researchers that I am sensitive in listening to their stories, and that I am empathic in not judging or challenging them, but co-creating new meanings through our conversations about secret sharing and choosing potential secret keepers.

I chose the conversational interview method because it is a particularly appropriate and productive method of gathering narratives of lived experience. In turn, my interest in gathering narratives is evident in Polkinghorne (1988), who states that,

Narrative is a form of 'meaning making.' It is a complex form which expresses itself by drawing together descriptions of states of affairs contained in individual sentences into a particular type of disclosure.... Narrative recognizes the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts in a whole. Its particular subject matter is human actions and events that affect human beings, which it configures into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion. (p. 36)

I also chose conversational interviewing as a method because conversation establishes a sincere atmosphere between my co-researchers (interviewees) and me. There is no pressure, because the conversation has a natural character which allows my participants to feel comfortable. One of the most important issues during qualitative research is the sense of trust between the researcher and the co-researchers. Although I was not interested in the nature of my participants' secrets, some disclosing of secrets was unavoidable, which is why the atmosphere of trust was significant during my interactions with my co-researchers. The control I exerted over the interview arose from my own experiential sharing, the follow-up questions, and my efforts to keep my participants conversationally close to the topic.

2.3 Analysis

I was interested in possible common themes among my co-researchers, and to discover them, meaning condensation and narrative structuring were the best methods. Kvale (1996) states, “This empirical phenomenological method may serve to analyze extensive and often complex interview texts by looking for natural meaning units and explicating their main themes” (p. 196). During conversation, each participant’s discussion often falls into several natural units, and the researcher must identify these units and characterize the central theme of each. Meaning structuring through narratives was used to see a bigger picture beyond individual stories told during the interviews. Kvale (1996) notes that, “Structuring through narratives will usually reduce the interview text; it may, however, also expand it by developing the potentialities of meaning in a simple interview story into more elaborate narratives” (p. 193). Though human science is not looking for generalizations, this narrative structuring analysis technique allows the researcher to see possible commonalities among narratives and illuminates general patterns participants used during decision-making about to whom they share secrets.

2.3 Participants

The number of participants in human science research is a controversial topic. Some researchers, such as Merleau-Ponty, argue that for understanding lived experience, one participant is enough. The focus of human science is not on generalization to a population, however, and Kvale (1996) states that, “The number of subjects necessary depends on a study’s purpose” (p. 102). He expands his thoughts about the number of interviewees in noting that “In current interview studies, the number of interviews tends

to be around 15 +/- 10. This number may be due to a combination of the time and resources available for the investigation and of the law of diminishing returns” (p. 102). For this research five women whom I know personally or whom I contacted using the snowball technique were asked to participate in this study. I decided to interview women because I am a woman and for me it would be easier to understand my co-researchers’ lived experience. For my participants it would also be more comfortable to establish a trustful atmosphere and to disclose to a female researcher rather than to a male researcher. Another reason for interviewing only women is that I did not want to raise the gender issue; as mentioned in chapter 1, gendered criteria influence people’s disclosures.

2.4 Procedures

I contacted research subjects, asking them to share their experience related to telling secrets, and more specifically to tell me how they make choices about whether to share a secret, and what characteristics of potential secret keepers are important for them. I negotiated a private time and location for each interview that fit my co-researcher’s needs, so that they would feel relaxed. Before each interview I sent an email to each of my potential co-researchers with the Informed Consent Form (Appendix I), and a document file with a description of the notion of “secret” (Appendix II). The goal of these emails was to give my co-researchers more information about my research, so they could think more thoroughly about whether or not they were willing to take part in the study. The document explains that secrets are events that arise from one’s lived experience. Although giving examples of secrets such as rape, sexual abuse, or child adoption might have made it easier to understand the notion of secret, I decided not to

give examples so that I would not mislead my participants. Later my co-researchers told me that these explanations were helpful in understanding what the focus of my study was.

I conducted the interviews in the facilities of the Department of Communication. Before each interview I explained that participation was voluntary and could be terminated at any time they wished. I gave my participants the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) to sign and explained how I would keep, use, and destroy the capta, and informed them about who would have access to the tapes and other capta. All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. I began transcribing the interviews immediately after I conducted them, so that I could better describe nonverbals and emotions my co-researchers had during the interview. I prepared all transcriptions personally.

Conversational interviews give participants the choice to disclose the information they feel comfortable discussing. I began the interviews by telling a story relevant to the research question, so the participants would better understand the focus of my research. I tried to keep my co-researchers close to the topic; when they began to talk about irrelevant topics I “directed” them back to the topic. Open-ended questions and follow-up questions were used to gather more information. I did not take any notes during the interviews, as taking notes might give the impression of being “observed.” I preferred to have natural conversation during the interviews because I wanted to establish an atmosphere of trust with my co-researchers.

I asked my co-researchers to tell me how they went about choosing a person with whom they could share a secret. It was important for the research that the participants

knew what I meant by the notion of “secret,” hence I explained what I considered the concept of “secret” to mean in my research. I questioned my co-researchers about what kind of personal characteristics were important for them when choosing a potential secret keeper, and asked them to share their experiences in making decisions about whom they could trust. I warned my co-researchers that they did not need to share the nature of their secrets with me, that the focus of the study was not the essence of their secrets, but how they chose potential secret keepers. After the interviews I reminded my research subjects one more time that their participation was voluntary, and that they could terminate any time they wished, even after the interview.

2.5. Researcher as Researcher Tool

As a human being I have my secrets, my skeletons in the closet. These are secrets that have accumulated throughout my life. I still remember secrets from my childhood, adolescence, and mature years. I am not happy to have these secrets; for me they are pieces of information that can make my life miserable. My secrets involve events in which I had no choice, but nevertheless I have to deal with them. There is much information deep in my mind, which I would prefer to not have. I believe that secrets can remain secrets only if one does not disclose them. Secrets are part of our personality and character, and if a person discloses secrets, that individual becomes an “open” book. I find being an open book is boring. Personally I do not think it is worthwhile to communicate with people whose secrets I know; these people are beyond my interest, they become predictable to some extent.

I have read a number of studies on the positive effects of self-disclosure on people's mental and physical health. Nevertheless, I am personally not ready for disclosure. I prefer to keep my secrets with me. It is my choice to be a "closed" book. In communication with others I try to manage conversation to avoid topics which might lead to unwanted questions, and hence to my secrets. By doing this I guard not only my secret, but also my right to privacy. I believe that every person himself/herself defines privacy borders; mine are tight. Even if I make an impression of being an open person, there are things I would never discuss. These secrets are my property and no one ever will enter there.

Another reason I do not share my secrets is that I perceive this process to be useless. Sharing a secret will not give me relief; it will only make me and my secret-keeper feel tension in our relationship. It is my point of view, which I understand to be naïve, that things that are not spoken of do not exist. By keeping silent I make my secrets voiceless. It gives me a kind of inner confidence.

Another reason I prefer not to share my secrets is that I am not sure of the reaction of the secret-keeper. If a potential secret-keeper is a person who is close to me, I will be afraid of consequences. Keeping the secrets will never put me at risk of being betrayed, judged, condemned, or avoided. I totally agree with the statement by Petronio (2002) that "There are risks that include making private disclosures to the wrong people, disclosing at a bad time, telling too much about ourselves, or compromising others" (p. 1). I cannot be totally sure about a potential secret-keeper. Sharing a secret is like a chain reaction

that never ends. That is why I do not want my potential secret-keepers to associate me with my secret.

One final reason for avoiding sharing my secrets is that after revelation I have no control over a secret. Indeed, after the secret sharing the information no longer belongs to a secret owner only, but also to a secret keeper, and it is almost impossible to manage and prevent information from further “distribution.” I agree with the *Hadis*, the anthology of stories about the lived experience of Muhammad, collected by Muhammad ibn Ismail al Buhari, referred to Amr ibn As, that it is a secret owner’s responsibility if his/her secret is further shared to other people by the secret keeper. The secret keeper cannot be blamed for this ignoble behavior: “There is no man to whom I will share my secret and then blame him/her for sharing it to others. How can I blame him/her if I was miserable and depressed to keep my secret” (Musayev, 2005, p. 320).

I am interested in the lived experience of my participants regarding how they choose to whom they can share a secret. Perhaps if I understand their points of view I can reflect on my knowledge and my own attitude toward secret sharing. This insight may even change my point of view, as I am open to reasonable changes.

Chapter 3:

The Narrative Interviews

3.1. Demi's Narrative Interview

I have known Demi for approximately two years. She is Caucasian and in her twenties. We have established a level of trust in our friendship that allows us to discuss any topic. She gives an impression of being an open person, very optimistic, and one who enjoys her life. She fits a positive stereotype about Americans – young, beautiful, successful, independent, communicative, highly educated, with strong beliefs and principles. For me, she represents the best in Americans and in American culture. I conduct the interview in her office at UAF. I feel very relaxed; the atmosphere of the interview is supportive and easygoing.

I begin the interview by reading the Informed Consent Form and asking Demi whether she has any questions. She does not. Then I tell her a story from my own experience to give her an idea about the goals of my study. The example serves as a model, in that I do not inform Demi about the nature of the secret, but only describe the circumstances and feelings I had when my mother shared a secret with me last summer when I was in my home city of Baku, Azerbaijan. After that, I ask Demi how she chooses people to whom she reveals her secrets. Demi says that she tries “to anticipate how people will react,” then she adds that trust is also important for her:

But the main thing is that there is trust - if I trust the person and I am not taking care whether they [close friends] keep my secret. I think it is more about judgment, how they perceive me, and I will tell them, though, if I don't want them

to tell anyone. Otherwise, I won't tell anything [secret]. If they tell anyone it is fine, if they don't it is fine.

Demi's statement seems to me a little bit odd. Trust, for me, means that my friends will not share my secret further, and I wonder if I have a different meaning for the word "trust." This leads me to a question about whether it is a problem for her if her friends share her secret further. She surprises me in saying that she does not care. Nevertheless, she adds that the motive her close friends have when sharing her secrets to other people is significant for her, "and it depends on the motive; I am really big on the motive. If your motive is to use it against me like ammunition then, yeah, that is going to really hurt me."

I remember that Demi mentioned that for her it was important to know her friends' possible reaction to her secrets. I raise a follow up question asking her to tell me more about her perspectives on that issue. Demi clarifies, saying that

I have to evaluate each person.... I would hope that my really close friends will be able to handle whatever I will tell them, even if initially they are shocked or disappointed with me. I am hoping that if not so much, it would not make the friendship dissolve.

I still do not clearly understand what "trust" means for her, and I ask her to explain to me how she sees trust. Demi indicates that "trust for me is more with the judgment, like 'I trust that you will process what I am telling you and not judge me, or if you going to judge me, discuss it with me and not let it ruin our friendship or ruin your perception of me.'" My co-researcher adds that she does not feel concern about how the greater group sees her. Her only concern is what her close friends think about her.

Then I ask Demi about the impact secret sharing has on the development of relationships. For Demi, secret sharing is an important part of relationship building. She continues:

I think that you do go closer by disclosing things about yourself, and a lot of things you consider secret. I think it [secret sharing] is really twofold because you are growing closer with your friend or even developing a friendship by disclosing and it [secret sharing] is also therapeutic for you.... You need to deterge [clean] them [secrets], and if you don't they get worse and so you need to discuss them and get social support that way.

I invite Demi to inform me if there is something else, besides predicting possible reaction and trust, which influences her choice. She indicates gender does not matter because she is from Seattle, which is considered an unofficial capital of homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered persons. She laughs and replies "Yes, and all the GLBT [gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders]. I may be talking to a tranny [transgendered person], who cares?!" I ask my co-researcher if she has ever regretted sharing secrets. Again, Demi surprises me because I do not feel the way she feels about the issue: "I just hadn't have a bad experience. Once the secret gets out it is a positive thing, because we are social animals and people know our secret then we don't have a burden [being overwhelmed] from our secrets." I indicate to Demi that I feel absolutely the opposite way, and that if people know my secrets I do not get relief. Instead, I worry because now people know my weak places. I also tell her that I do not want people to discuss my

secrets or me behind my back. I ask Demi to tell me what she thinks about this. Her response is:

Right, right, for me I don't value their [outside people, non-friends] opinions because I don't care about them. They are human beings and I care about them, but on the social level, I don't care. So if they want to talk about me and find it enjoyable, as long as my close friends are not making misjudgments on me then – I don't care.

I continue to explore the issue with her, noting that if people know one's secret they can destroy one's reputation: "So why give people a weapon that can destroy you?"

Demi thinks for a moment and replies:

I don't know, I try not to worry what other people are thinking, because I am a control freak and I have to realize that I cannot control what people think about. Maybe I can guard some information, but I still try not to focus on it or worry about it. If they find out some information about me and make judgments about me based on that, and they don't pick [take] other things into consideration and I think like 'I cannot help them' because they don't know the whole story about me. I feel like if they know my secrets then they have an opportunity to know me.

The true me.

Demi adds to her statement that she is expecting support and constructive criticism from her friends when sharing her secrets. I come back to the situation when her friends share her secret further. Demi explains:

It is asking a lot to keep someone's powerful secret and not tell anyone, especially if you have mutual friends who might want to know. And then you are creating a situation where that person needs to block out this area so you cannot discuss it with your mutual friend. And for me it is just not fair to ask that friend to be a boundary keeper for my secret because that is involving them and that can harm them socially because they are not allowed to talk about this, and it can cause problems in the friendship.

I decide to ask what is most important for Demi, trust or possible reaction? She thinks for a moment and says that she will go after reaction, "because I care about how my secret is perceived; however, I can see where it would be a benefit telling to the person who will give me constructive criticism." Then my co-researcher adds that

I do evaluate and it is not for me, it is also I have to think about how that person will react. For example, I don't want them to fall into depression or make them angry, or make them feel guilty, or like they have some responsibility for my secret, and I don't want to make them feel that way. So I have to be empathetic to how they are going to react for themselves.

Demi and I talk for a little bit about different consequences self-disclosure might have, then I thank her and tell that her contribution to my research is highly appreciated.

3.2. Jaclyn's Narrative Interview

I have known Jaclyn approximately for a year. She is Chinese in her early thirties. Jaclyn is married, and has lived in Fairbanks for several years. Although the Chinese and Azerbaijani cultures seem to be different, Jaclyn and I agree on many things from a

cultural perspective. We have similar opinions relevant to family, education, the workplace, and other interpersonal relationship issues. This “harmony” in viewpoints has made us very good friends, despite the short period of acquaintance. We have developed not only strong friendship, but also a significant level of trust. We discuss almost all things that have been happening to us.

Jaclyn and I decide that the best place to interview her is the Communication Department. First I read the Informed Consent Form to Jaclyn, and ask her whether she has any questions. She answers that the goal of the interview session is clear for her. I begin our conversational interview by telling Jaclyn the story from my own experience regarding secrecy and secret sharing, without sharing with her the nature of my secret. The purpose of the story is to help my co-researcher to understand what kind of lived experience I am interested in, and that the nature of her secrets are not the focus of my study. I ask her to tell me how she chooses and what is important to her when she makes a decision about to whom she is going to share her secret. Jaclyn thinks for a moment and states:

At the very beginning, I think the most reliable and trustworthy persons – your spouse, your partner, or your immediate family. [My choice] is based on our relationship.... I believe him or her [potential secret keeper] is my good friend. When I said good friends, it means that this person is trustworthy; he or she will not reveal my secret to other people. And I feel comfortable when I talk to people I trust and I think it is a key issue, I think it must be trustworthy person.

I ask Jaclyn about the relationship she has with the person she is disclosing to, and she says that usually it is a friendship, but there are cases when she can tell the secret to a stranger. My co-researcher indicates two things that are important to her when she makes a decision about to whom she will share a secret: "I refer to the key issues – one is trustworthy person, the second one, feel comfortable. So, it is not necessary for those people to have any relationship with you, maybe just a stranger. It could happen."

Jaclyn's statement interests me and I ask her to talk more about self-disclosure to a total stranger. As we talk about disclosure to strangers Jaclyn adds that she will tell a secret to a stranger if she is feeling uncomfortable and she needs immediate relief through conversation with someone. This part of the conversation becomes interesting to me. My co-researcher explains her immediate need to talk to a stranger to get comfortable by noting that

That kind of comfort is a very internal, personal experience. From the emotional perspective you release your emotions, because secrets involve emotions sometimes, so when you tell someone your secret you can relieve your emotion, so you don't consider consequences after you tell people. For example, a secret is bothering me internally; I have to find someone to talk about it, but at the same time I don't have anyone, so I may just talk to someone. Maybe I will go to the coffee house; I will talk to someone sitting next to me.

We explore this topic and Jaclyn tells me that in some cases she can wait until there is a friend around to share a secret, but sometimes if a secret is bothering her, she will share it immediately. I wonder whether Jaclyn is concerned about possible consequences such as

betrayal from the stranger's side. My co-researcher clarifies that she shares secrets to strangers only in emergency cases, when she needs to release her emotions, and in these situations she thinks little about the consequences "I maybe regret, but still I will choose some stranger to talk."

I ask my co-researcher with whom she usually shares secrets. Jaclyn discloses her preference for sharing secrets to someone who is not in the Chinese community. When I ask her the reason for this, she says that there is no reason. Then she thinks for several seconds and gives an explanation from the Chinese cultural perspective: "Chinese people always send good news to our friends and family, and keep those bad news or bad things for themselves, because we don't want our friends or family to worry about our problem. That is quite a cultural issue." Jaclyn describes one of her friends to whom she shares every secret she has: "We know each other more than ten years, and she is Buddhist, and she is educated, and I feel like her analysis technique is very good, and I feel like she has good listening skills, and she can comfort me." Jaclyn also adds that she is sure that whenever she shares a secret, her friend will not tell her secret to other people. My co-researcher informs me that she is not only looking for relief and support when sharing secrets, but also for advice.

Jaclyn's desire to get relief, support, and advice leads me to my next question. I ask if she tries to predict the possible reaction of the person she is sharing her secret to, and I get an interesting answer:

This has never happened to me [predicting of possible reaction], because when I decide to tell people my secret, I never analyze how people will react or I never

try to predict what their respond is. No, no. No, I never do that, and I told you if I trust people I really want to tell them, but I cannot control that, things are changing, because I don't know him or her. I never had this experience but if he or she decides to tell other people I don't know what will happen.

I come back to the issue of getting advice when sharing a secret and ask Jaclyn whether she prefers to share a secret to friends who are biased, or to a professional, such as counselor. Jaclyn says that in her Chinese culture it is not common to visit counselors when one is having some kind of interpersonal communication problem, "So, for me, I never think about that [visiting a counselor], they [counselors] will never be my target to tell my secret. Never. And I don't think counseling can help." I ask Jaclyn to tell me more regarding why she has such a poor opinion about counselors and counseling. My co-researcher points to a disadvantage of counselors: "I don't believe they are enough credible. For me a counselor is a good listener, they [counselors] don't help you to solve a problem. If a need a listener I will find a friend, husband." Jaclyn and I joke that unlike a counselor, a friend or husband is free of charge.

I ask Jaclyn to tell me what else influences her choices when making a decision about to whom share a secret. She says that intuition is also important in making a decision. She explains that usually we trust people, even though we do not know them very well, and in these cases we rely on our intuition. This leads our conversation to my next question about whether sharing secrets is a positive thing or not. Jaclyn thinks for a moment and states that "If this secret is bothering you and upsetting you, telling people is a good thing.... Otherwise if it is not bothering you, you don't need to tell people." I tell

Jaclyn that what she has just said is basically what I found while doing my literature review: one should not share a secret unless this secret is affecting his/her mental or physical health. Jaclyn agrees and adds that if a secret affects her mental or physical health she will share it, and she will not worry about whether that person will release her secret to other people.

I suggest to Jaclyn that perhaps it is her choice and responsibility if her secret is shared further because she chose the wrong person. In turn, Jaclyn explains her point of view: “Yes, it is my choice. I chose to tell you my secret, but at that time it is not my concern. If I know that you are a bad mouth, I will not tell you! If I decided to tell you it means that I trust you already, that is why I will not consider if you will release my secret.” We continue to talk about risks of secret sharing and my co-researcher indicates that the nature of the secret is a significant issue:

Just for example, if I really killed a person, even though it is bothering my physical and mental health, because killing a person is a criminal behavior, criminal act, so you may not tell anybody even though they [potential secret keepers] are friends.... If the secret is “I killed a person” I don’t think I will tell a stranger, not even my immediate family, or spouse.

Jaclyn and I agree that in major things, such as homicide, mind and reason are more important than emotions. At the end of our conversation, Jaclyn remembers one important thing about reasons for secret sharing. She adds that sharing a secret which arises from her lived experience is an act of recognition. She wants her potential secret keeper to know what happened to her. She continues that she also needs support and advice, or a

solution for the problem if she made a mistake. Sensing that our conversation is not opening new issues, I thank Jaclyn for her participation in my study and close the interview.

3.3. Linda's Narrative Interview

I have known Linda for approximately one year. She is Caucasian and in her early thirties. We met through a mutual friend, and although we do not meet often, we are very friendly. In her communication with people, she uses hand gestures and other non-verbals a lot; this helps me to better understand her. Linda is the mother of three children, and is in the middle of a divorce with her husband. She describes herself as having an interesting and complicated life, full of events both sad and pleasant. Linda gives me the impression of a person who accepts and acknowledges difficulties and problems and tries to find ways to solve them.

Linda and I meet in the Department of Communication after Linda's workday is over. Before the interview we chat for a little bit about mundane life, and establish what I perceive as a trusting and friendly atmosphere for the interview. I read the Informed Consent Form to her, and ask if she has questions. She replies that the goal of the interview is clear to her and that she does not have any questions. As with my other co-researchers, I begin by telling Linda a story from my own experience, particularly about the secret that my mother shared with me last summer when I was in Azerbaijan. I do not share with Linda the nature of the secret; I only disclose the process of the sharing and the feelings and emotions both my mother and I had during that experience. I ask her to

tell me her lived experience in making a decision about with whom she would like to share a secret.

Linda thinks for a moment, and says that it depends how important the secret is to her. It can be a little important (she shows “a little” with her fingers) or of big importance (again, she shows “big” with her fingers). Then she adds that there has been a difference in sharing her secrets depending on her age:

In one way, when I was younger, I was more trusting to other people. So I gave secret information to people who I thought I was close to, that later on I look back and see they were not close friends. And also when I was younger I shared information to people that was secret information or private, special important information for me, that then when I shared it I did not realize how important it was and now that I look back on it I go ‘Wow! Why would I say it?’

I wonder if as Linda has grown older, she has changed her perspectives on choosing an appropriate person to share a secret with. I ask her what is important for her now; what is she looking for in a person when she wants to share a secret with them? She begins her answer by giving me reasons for secret sharing. For Linda it is important to get a potential secret keeper’s “input” on her information. Then she notes that she prefers to share her secrets with “People that I feel the most trustful and the closest.” For Linda that person is her mother. She also adds that she has one or two close friends with whom she shares her secrets, as well. My co-researcher explains she shares secrets with these friends “Because throughout their life they have a history with me, you know, I have known them for more than 10 years, and so now I feel close to them and the trust is

there.” I clarify by asking if trust and being close to her are important issues for Linda, and she replies, “Yes, yes. And length. For how long I know them.”

I turn the conversation to Linda’s desire to get “input.” I do not understand clearly whether “input” is a kind of an invitation to her potential secret keeper to disclose back to her, or a need for advice. Linda replies:

I am not a person who has a lot of secrets. I am very open. I actually tell people a lot about me, more than other people I know. I am very open with who I am, my religion..., and my family, and my life.... But the things that are important to me and that I feel might change somebody’s judgment of me, or things that happen to in my life that I don’t feel I want to talk to people.... If I tell this information it is usually not to just to tell them and share a secret, but to tell them and say ‘What do you think about this?’ Usually when I have secret I have to make this choice, or I have ‘This is what happened to me and I want you to tell me what you think about it.’

I ask Linda whether she wants to know the opinion of that person, and she replies with expression in her voice: “Opinion! Yes! Because people who I tell my secrets to are often people who I value their judgment, value their information.”

I tell Linda that I personally prefer not to share my secrets with others. I explain by saying that usually I am trying to predict the possible reaction my potential secret keeper may have. I tell my co-researcher that I prefer not to risk, because getting bad or negative feedback after sharing my secret will be emotionally very devastating and insulting to me. I ask Linda if she is practicing “analyzing” people, in other words

whether she is trying to predict their possible reaction. Linda notes that before self-disclosing she thinks whether it is appropriate for people to know “This [secret] is something that happened in my life, or to me, that this person [pointing to one imaginary person in the room] does not need to know, that person [pointing to a second] does not need to know, that person [pointing to a third] does not need to know.” She adds that people she usually does not share secrets to people who are not close friends, co-workers, acquaintances, or other people whom she has known for a short period of time. To clarify her viewpoint, Linda gives me an example from her own experience and tells me that she has an acquaintance with whom she was attending high school, and who tended to reveal a lot of personal and intimate information to people she was not close friends with:

I don't call her [acquaintance from high school] for a coffee because I know that when I do call her for a coffee we sit down, have couple of coffees, and then she tells me things I don't want to know. So that actually can keep people away from you.

I agree with Linda and tell her that some people self-disclose for the sake of self-disclosure. This leads to my next question. I ask Linda to tell me the reasons she discloses to others. My co-researcher states that the biggest reason she has is that “I value the opinion of the person I share with, and I want to get their opinion on this [her secret].” Further Linda explains her perspective, applying it to close relationships: “There is something in a close relationship. I self-disclose information to feel close to that person, kind of like ‘This is who I am, this is what happened to me, this is why I am the way I am, this is who I am.’ So that they know who they are getting into a close relationship

with.” Then I ask Linda whether she has ever regretted sharing her secrets and self-disclosing:

Yes, yes. I had past relationships where I disclosed and relationship ended, and that information that I gave to them is not only with them, but also with other people. Yes, because [pausing and sighing] what I found is that when people are close, they share, but when people, for whatever reason, become apart -- if it is a relationship they break up, or if it is a friendship and they just are apart, they don't value this information, like they did when they were close. When they are close they really value it, when they are not close they don't value it and they feel like they can share it, so they did share it.

I reply to Linda that I understand what she means, and that personally I always regret sharing my secrets. We discuss whether to share or not share secrets, in general, is a positive thing. Linda and I come up with the thought that before sharing a secret, one should “digest” the secret. In other words, one needs to accept the secret, especially if a secret is a negative issue, then process that secret, and only after that let it go. As she says, “It is good to let go something that you did, and that means sharing becomes a joke among your friends and that is good.” This leads us to debate the nature of secrecy. Linda asks me if there are positive secrets, and she jokes “I guess there could be good secrets, you know, like ‘Shh, I won a million dollars!’” I object that for me all secrets are negative. Even if I have won a million dollars, I will not share it, because it can cause negative feedback such as jealousy and envy. Nevertheless, Linda states, “The secrets do tend to be negative, or tragic, or sad.” I tell Linda that sometimes people keep very good

news secret, fearing that others would not be able to handle that information. Linda thinks for a second and supports my comment by giving an example from her mother's experience: her mom had to hide her very high grades in high school, because when other students knew about her grades it caused animosity in the classroom.

I ask Linda if she had a choice to share a secret with her mother, or her close friends, or to go to a professional counselor to get help and advice, which one she would choose? She gives an immediate response:

Both. There are things you cannot talk to your mom, or your boyfriend, and sometimes the things you really need to talk about are about your mom or your boyfriend, and so for those reasons the counselor or psychologist is really good. You can get an objective view, and to say 'you know, this is not really a problem, you need to try that or try that.' Because they [the counselor or psychologist] don't have a biased opinion. Your mom has a biased opinion, and your boyfriend has a biased opinion.

I ask Linda if visits to a counselor have helped her. She says that her visits have helped her a lot, especially in problems with her ex-husband when she got advice about how to deal with her children in her divorce situation.

I turn the conversation to the notion of "trust" by asking Linda to tell me what "trust" means to her. Linda tells me how she develops trust with others:

I think that trust builds up with time. When you first meet someone you give them some information 'this is who I am on the outside,' and then you know more, and more, and more 'this is who I am in myself, inside of my head.' But first all you

give them is a little bit of information. And then you see how they react and if they go and tell to other people, and over time you go 'okay, so you are able to be okay with just this on the skin [surface],' so that you go a little bit deeper, and deeper, and deeper. And I think this is how trust builds up and why I choose people that try over time.

To clarify, I ask Linda if time is a "litmus test," which shows her that she can trust people, or in other words that people will not betray her as time passes, and will not tell her secrets to other people. Linda confirms my suggestion.

I tell Linda my own point of view regarding sharing secrets. I explain my choice not to share my secrets because I am not sure that even my closest friend will not turn his/her back to me, will not betray me, and will not use my private information against me. I note that I am afraid of being betrayed, and to avoid any possible risks I prefer to keep my private information secret. We discuss this issue and Linda tells me that there are positive and negative moments in secret sharing. In particular, she notes that the positive side is that secret sharing builds trust and allows people to get advice on how to deal with problems and difficulties in their lives. The negative side is the risk of being betrayed. Linda gives me example from her life when her openness to her ex-husband caused her troubles. She tells me that when they were together she told him her secret [she also tells me the nature of the secret, but for ethical considerations I will not paraphrase her]. Several years later, her ex-husband not only twisted and used that information in court against her, but also shared her private information with others. Now, according to Linda, "It is public knowledge."

Linda then summarizes the effects of secret sharing:

I think that my lesson from this is that if I tell something to somebody, I need to be okay with other people knowing it, and not only I have to be okay with other people knowing it at twisting it, and people judging it, but I have to be okay with the thing that happened. Like not only do I have to be okay with other people talking about it, but I have to find a place to be okay with the things that happened in my life, because if I cannot, if I look at my past and if I can't be okay with it, then I cannot be okay with sharing it.... The people whom I share [with] have to be close to me, how long I know [them], but also am I okay with this information, had I made peace with the negative that happened, because if I had not and I shared, and it comes back to me, it hurts me more.

I agree with Linda and tell her that indeed, before one shares his/her secret one should accept and process that information, because in case one is betrayed by his/her secret keeper, and that information comes back to one through other people, it will be much more painful.

I ask Linda to tell me if there is an impact on her relationships, or in other words, if self-disclosure affects her relationships. Linda thinks for a moment and replies, "I think sometimes it tests the relationship. I think sometimes you think 'Hey! Can you handle this? Can you handle knowing this? Can you be okay with what happened?'" And I think that I have learned [that] sometimes sharing secrets does not make you closer, it makes you farther apart. There is a lot weight to put on someone." I support Linda by informing her that the secret my mother had shared with me last summer is a burden for me, and

since that day I constantly think about the secret. In return, Linda tells how her mother many years ago preferred not to tell her teenage daughter about financial problems they had for sake of Linda's piece of mind. Her mother disclosed to her about that issue only recently. Linda's mother explained her choice as protecting Linda from worries and fears she could have experienced as a teenager. Now, according to Linda, she understands and highly appreciates her mother's caring and kindness. I provide Linda with an analogy from my own experience. I inform Linda that our conversation has been very helpful to my research, and thank I think her for participating.

3.4. Sonya's Narrative Interview

I met Sonya several months earlier at a Chinese New Year party where she was performing. She is half-Austrian and half-Indian and in her forties. I spend time occasionally with Sonya and her husband. She is an intellectual person with interesting perspectives on different issues. Sonya has an artistic nature, and writes poetry and short novels. Though I am not fond of poetry, generally, Sonya's poetry has touched me, and impressed me with its fascinating combination of simple words that create very complicated and sophisticated meanings. I think Sonya is a person who prefers to talk on paper to express her deep feelings and to describe her emotions. Sonya is not a conversational person, and my interview with her was the most difficult from the perspective of motivating her to speak. I was interested in her ideas and thoughts, but throughout the interview session, I felt that Sonya could not or was not willing to open herself to me. At first, I thought it was due to her short period of acquaintance with me, but later, as I was observing her, I noticed that she acted similarly even with her husband.

We conduct the interview in the Department of Communication when Sonya's work day is over. Before the interview begins, I read the Informed Consent Form to Sonya and ask her if she understands the purpose of the interview and if she has any questions. My co-researcher replies that everything is clear to her. As in my other conversations, I begin by telling Sonya that when I was back in my country last summer my mother shared a secret with me. I inform her that the secret my mother shared with me is significant, not only to my mother, but also for the rest of our family. I tell Sonya that everyday after my mother's disclosure I think about her secret, and that to some extent it has changed my life. I do not disclose the nature of the secret to my co-researcher so she will not feel obligated to share her secrets with me. I ask Sonya what her experience is in choosing people with whom she shares her secrets, or in other words, what is important to her when making a decision about whom she can trust with her secret.

Sonya tells me that sometimes she does not share her secrets, but if she does so, it will be to her husband or to one good friend she has known for a while. I ask my co-researcher what drives her to share her secrets with these people, and she says that her disclosures are for the sake of preventing her loved ones, particularly her husband, from negative information that can reach him from the outside: "it might be something that can affect him someday." I try to clarify her words by asking if the reason for her self-disclosure is to prevent her husband from misunderstanding and to give him full information, and Sonya confirms my words. I ask her what "trust" means to her, and she replies "Trust in terms of keeping the secret; that they will not tell it to someone else."

I tell Sonya that before sharing my secrets I try to predict the possible reaction of the potential secret keeper, and if I am not absolutely sure that this person will understand me, I will not risk telling my secret. I would not share a secret because I do not want to burden people with my secrets, which are almost all negative. I do not want people to blame me, which can destroy the relationship, and I am afraid of feeling even worse in case I get negative feedback. I again ask Sonya if she is trying to predict other's possible reactions, and she answers positively. In response to my probe about why she tries to predict reactions, she reveals that "I tend to keep secrets more than share them because, I don't know, maybe because how I am feeling, I just don't like to burden people. Sometimes I just try to predict their reaction."

Sonya's statement leads me to a follow-up question about whether she shares her secrets only when she is totally sure of getting positive feedback. Sonya thinks for a moment and replies, "No, sometimes I know that it will be a negative reaction but I know that keeping it secret will be even worse.... Maybe one aspect [of the secret] would come out, and this person will find out about this aspect of the secret and then that leads to something else." Sonya adds that situations in which one hides private or secret information from a close person, can lead not only to mistrust, but also to other negative consequences. She sometimes even shares negative information that may be hurtful to the secret keeper for the sake of trust in the relationship. In our conversation we label this situation a "chain reaction;" in other words, concealment of private and important information causes negative consequences, which in turn causes other negative consequences.

I ask Sonya about her personal goal in secret sharing: is she looking for advice, or doing it for the sake of the relationship? Sonya pauses for a moment and states “I think it [sharing secrets] is usually to be fair, but sometimes I also want to know whether my thoughts about it [the secret] are valid. Sometimes it is something that I don’t know how to react to or what to think of it,” and she is also looking for advice. I wonder aloud if Sonya has ever regretted secret sharing. She laughs and says, “Yes,” and describes how her trust was violated a number of times. I joke and ask her “And that is why you narrowed them [secret keepers] to two people [husband and friend] now?” Sonya laughs again and replies “Yes, and also a few times I had people use it [one of her secrets] against me.” Then Sonya adds that she is very careful about her step-daughter. She explains that even though her step-daughter and she love each other, still Sonya keeps some distance between them. The reason is that Sonya had a negative experience when sharing to her step-daughter, which caused problems with her husband. Currently Sonya is very careful with her step daughter, and calls this distance between them an “unspoken law.”

When I ask Sonya whether her secrets are usually positive or negative, she thinks for a second and says “Probably usually negative.” I remind Sonya that she is half-Austrian and half-Indian, and ask her to tell me if there is any cultural influence on her perception of secrets. I clarify my question by informing her about the stereotype that Eastern people are more closed, and their secrets tend to have a sinful or negative nature, and that Western people tend to be more open. I ask what she thinks about this: “The bigger cultural influence was from my mother – an Austrian. And I don’t know if secrets

are negative there [Austria]... I know Americans like people to be open and share everything.”

I continue our conversation by asking Sonya to tell me what usually happens after she shares her secrets: do her secret keeper and she come back to the issue and discuss it again, or do they consider the issue as a closed book and never come back? She reflects that,

No, sometimes I come back to the issue. It depends on the nature of the secret and the reaction – how the person [with whom] I shared has reacted. Usually if I do come back to the issue I am very careful. Sometimes it is just a remark to close it, and then I don't have to go back.

Sonya adds “It takes me a long time to get to that point because I think about it [the nature of the secret] and look at it from different angles.” She needs to think first about the secret, and only then share it.

I turn the conversation to the issue of the benefits of secret sharing. I remind Sonya that at the beginning of our conversation she said that one of her reasons for secret sharing was getting advice, and ask her whether she prefers to get advice from her husband or her close friend, who are biased and not objective, or to get professional advice by visiting a counselor. Sonya states that “I think it is better to go for professional help. I have never gone, but there were times when I thought I should go.” We agree that a professional helper can give a more objective view of a situation. I pose a question about how important it is to get approval, or non-judgment, when she shares her secrets, and she clarifies that sometimes she needs to hear words of approval and not be judged,

but sometimes she would like to know different perspectives and opinions, and constructive criticism. I question how difficult is for her to carry a secret and not share it. Sonya replies that for her it is not a big deal to carry a secret and not share it to anyone. Nevertheless, she will share it with her husband and close people in case keeping the secret can be harmful for them.

In the last minutes of the interview I ask Sonya to identify the main things which are important to her while making a decision about to whom she can share a secret, and she notes trust, and trying to predict their possible reaction. Because my co-researcher is not very talkative, I encourage her to express herself and ask her if she wants to add something else. Sonya thinks for a moment: "It is also important for me that if I have a secret, and if I don't know to share or not, I am very protective because I don't want anything to do to it. Some people think that I am lying, for me it is not lying, I just don't want to share." I support Sonya's statement by saying that I have had a similar experience when people were insisting, and I was keeping silent, which was interpreted as lying, though my intent was to protect my private information from others. I tell Sonya that I appreciate her answers to my questions, and that our conversation has been very helpful for my research. I thank her for participation.

3.5. Isabelle's Narrative Interview

I met Isabelle approximately two years ago. She is in her early twenties, and one of the brightest and most intelligent persons I have been interacting within the USA. Isabelle has a strong personality; she has goals and ambitions. My co-researcher is conversational, very expressive, a vivid mimic, and has a sense of humor. Interaction

with Isabelle is very easygoing and the atmosphere during the interview session was friendly.

We conduct the interview in the Department of Communication, and begin by talking for a while, establishing a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. I read the Informed Consent Form and ask Isabelle if the purpose of the interview is clear to her. She replies that she understands the purpose of the session and does not have any questions. As with other co-researchers, I share my story regarding the secret my mother had shared with me last summer when I was at home, in and ask Isabelle what kind of personal characteristics are important to her when she makes the decision about with whom she can share a secret. Isabelle thinks for a moment and replies:

Hmm... Obviously trusting a person to not expose your secret to others is an issue, and I think, and part of, or another aspect which is really important is that the person to whom [one is] revealing a secret, that you can predict or expect a level of empathy from them, that they will understand why it is something that is not what you casually tell other people, so I think that telling secrets usually requires for me, as a person, I have a level of intimacy with the person, I am close with them.

Then Isabelle begins to apply to her family members the criteria she uses for choosing a person with whom she would share a secret. She has three siblings, two older sisters and a younger brother. Although the age difference among Isabelle and her sisters is not significant, she prefers to share her secrets with her mother. She explains that her sisters

have strong personalities, and when their opinion does not match with Isabelle's opinion it bothers them:

They have high expectations of me. I think they want me to be like them in a lot of ways, and when I am different in certain ways and I believe different things, that bothers them. And that is interesting why it is bothering them, because it does not bother me. We have different opinions, and I respect their opinions, and I expect that in return ..., they are older than me and they conceive me as a little sister, so I don't know as much as they know.

Isabelle talks for a while about her relationship with her family, and her preferences in choosing a person with whom she can share a secret. Then she describes what "secret" means for her: "For me, at this point of my life, my secrets concern more likely my fears rather than things I have done," and because secrets for Isabelle involve her fears, she avoids verbalizing them because "by verbalizing, making it [the secret] real, such as 'I am afraid of this,' you know, this uncertainty of my life, which are many, which can't be helped." Isabelle further explains her fear of putting her fears in language. She thinks that by verbalizing she makes her fears exist: "I don't even want to write it down, I don't even want to say it aloud because if I do, then that makes it into existence, which causes me more anxiety than being inside of me for some moments. So I don't know if it is me being in denial about things, this is my way of defense." Then Isabelle clarifies her perspectives on empathy, which is important for her while self-disclosing:

I think empathy is a real thing for me about disclosing. For me keeping a secret is something that causes you emotional pain and just something you are ashamed of

or you don't want people to know, so it is really important if you are going to expose yourself to somebody who is not going to expose you to others and is not going to reject you.

I ask Isabelle if she considers her secrets as negative, and she reveals that she keeps secret things with which she is not comfortable, or is ashamed of. Then I turn conversation to the notion of "trust." I wonder about Isabelle's understanding of the concept "trust," and she explains the notion of "trust" from the perspective of the secret keeper and from the perspective of the secret owner. If Isabelle is in the position of the secret keeper and the secret is bothering her, she wants to "go through this [the nature of the secret], analyze it, not only with myself, in my head, but with somebody else to get it better." She expects from her potential secret keeper that

No matter what I say, I can rely on this person to support me. I can rely on this person to accept me, so I guess a sort of unconditional caring or love no matter what I do, no matter what I say it will be okay. There always will be a solution for a problem and I am not going to abandon you, or I am not going to reject you because of this. I think trust and love and honesty are what actually it means, it is hard to articulate.

Isabelle explains her point of view: "We all do things that we are ashamed of, especially as far as in family. I am telling you that and you may not be happy. My expectations, especially with my mom, are that no matter what I tell her that she'd never stop loving me, and accepting me as her daughter."

From the perspective of a secret owner, Isabelle describes how her unmarried sister became pregnant and she [Isabelle] did not blame or criticize her. Instead she asked what she could do to help and support her:

I have always been supportive and not critical of everything she has done. So when she has messed up or made a bad choice it has always been 'okay, what do you need me for? How I can help you?' instead of 'Why were you so dumb!' this kind of comments, which you can get from siblings.

Isabelle says she wants to see this kind of attitude from people close to her: support and preparedness to help in difficult situation.

I remind Isabelle that in the beginning of the interview she mentioned that intimacy level is a significant aspect that influences her decision regarding with whom she will share a secret. Isabelle explains that intimacy level is a matter of connection she has with a potential secret keeper, and she can have this connection with wide range of people from her environment, such as her mother, boyfriend, co-worker, or close friend. Then Isabelle notes that she is familiar with people who prefer a stranger, priest, or psychiatrist over a close person when they share a secret. I ask her if she ever confessed to a priest, and Isabelle states that she did, and because of the practice in her religion, Catholicism, it is a normal process for her. We continue to talk about different ways of getting secret information off of one's chest – talking to close people, confessing to a religious figure, "vomiting" personal and intimate information to a total stranger, or visiting a counselor. Then Isabelle asks me if I have heard about a web site where people

share their secrets. I note that I am not aware of this site, and Isabelle laughs and tells me that there are

hilarious things, suicide notes, and all these [secretive] different things. I would not ever think about doing this. I don't know because I am very open with talking about my life and talking about how I feel, telling people more than they want to know. I am not secretive at all, I don't feel like I have this confession inside of me that I need to divulge. I think that whole intimacy level thing; if I have something bothering me I definitely talk to somebody I have an established relationship with in some capacity.

My co-researcher's willingness to share her secrets leads me to my next question: What is a secret for her? Isabelle says that "I have never been able to keep big things inside, it always comes out. I am just getting upset, crying, trying to let it out." I clarify by paraphrasing that if she has things inside her that are destroying her peace of mind, does she want to let them out. Isabelle replies:

Well, for myself yes.... I found that whenever I keep something into myself and don't share it, it just causes me anxiety. I am getting more and more anxious about it, and it becomes more a major aspect of my life, rather than dealing with that, instead of it being fixed, or finding solution, why this is a secret.

I shift direction a little to explore what Isabelle usually experiences after self-disclosing, whether she gets support, advice, or even regrets sharing the secret. She replies "I would say, yes, on the things that are bothering me and scaring me. When I was disclosing I have found that I was satisfied being supported or finding help." As far as

regretting secret sharing, Isabelle tells me a story. She has a friend who is, according to Isabelle 'gossipy,' and that friend knew about her secret (for ethical considerations I am not presenting the nature of the secret). Isabelle's friend used every possible situation to "pinch" her about her secret issue. Isabelle describes the constant pinching as "Being hurtful for the sake of being hurtful, you know, it was something what would make me uncomfortable and just sad, or whatever. With things like that I definitely regretted telling my secrets, because they use secrets against you."

Isabelle notes that she is very open person and she has never kept secret things such as health problems, or experimenting with alcohol or marijuana, or eating disorders. She also adds that the biggest secret she has had did not belong to her; it was her sister's secret. Isabelle continues by describing her perspectives on her own secrets:

I am terrible in that – keeping my secrets. Even if something happened to me, something terrible, if I was raped, and anything like that, I think I would not keep it to myself. I am not a really private person. It is like, I don't mind sharing with details of my life, but I don't go back telling a stranger. But I am not like these crazy ladies sitting in the coffee house telling how many children and grandchildren they have, and what their names are, and whatever.

I laugh with Isabelle about her joke, and mention other situations when people disclose a lot of private information to strangers who are totally uninterested and literally suffering from these self-disclosures. We note that usually these situations happen in trips on planes or trains. I thank Isabelle and tell her that our conversation has been very helpful for my research.

Chapter 4

Human Science Research Analysis

My co-researchers shared with me their experiences regarding secrecy and choosing a person to whom they usually share secrets. Three main themes arise from these narratives, which revolve around issues such as trust, predicting possible reactions, and the benefits and detriments of secret sharing. These themes weave together in that these women choose potential secret keepers according to the reaction they expect to get. In other words, these women choose a person who will tell them what they want to hear. I will interpret the different experiences my co-researchers have of trusting others, of the process of predicting possible reaction, and of the benefits and detriments of secret sharing.

4.1 Theme 1: “Do I trust you?”

Each co-researcher notes that “trust” is the most important characteristic she is looking for in potential secret keepers, yet one can see from the capta that each participant has her own unique definition of trust. Every woman notes that “trust” means that their information will not go beyond their secret keeper. Sonya, Jaclyn, and Linda clearly specify that the person they trust must keep their information secret and not share it to anyone further. For them, knowing that the secret keeper will prevent their information from spreading further is the key condition for sharing a secret. My perceptions from our conversations are that Linda, Jaclyn, and Sonya have steady personalities: their requests to their secret keepers are clear – they want their information

to be secret, and they do not want the public to be aware of their secrets. They do not want to resist or deal with public opinion. They want to keep things quiet.

Demi has a deeper perspective on “trust.” In our conversation she reveals that she does not care if her secret is shared further, but she also notes that she does not care if her secret is further shared among her friends or people who are friendly to her. Demi implies that her carelessness is not absolute; she is concerned with the motive her friends have when they share her secret further “and it depends on the motive; I am really big on the motive. If your motive is to use it against me like ammunition then, yeah, that is going to really hurt me.” Like the other co-researchers, Demi also wants to protect her information. The difference between Demi and the others is that she is more committed to her friends and believes there should not be secrets among friends. Friendship is a big part of Demi’s life. She keeps no secrets from her friends, and in turn she expects her friends to share their secrets with her. She thinks that it is not fair if one of her friends knows her secret and other friends do not; from her perspective this can create relationship problems among mutual friends.

Demi also argues that asking one friend to keep a piece of information secret is a burden for that friend. Demi’s intention to spread her information among her friends and people who are friendly to her is a way of showing her appreciation of their friendship, and her commitment to her friends. In other words, being honest with her friends is her contribution to the relationship. Demi’s attitude reflects Petronio’s (2002) concept of Relational Development: “The road to relationship development often depends on the way personal boundaries are transformed into dyadic boundaries through disclosure of

private information” (p. 137). Demi mentions that motivation is important: if she feels that a friend of hers has bad intentions while distributing her secret, her feelings are hurt. Though Demi says that she does not care about the opinion of the broad masses, perhaps she wants to be liked and loved by everyone in her environment. For her it is not an issue of being a “star” or being in the spotlight; it is more about creating a positive, supportive, friendly, and peaceful atmosphere around her.

Isabelle also has different perceptions of “trust,” a deeper and more complex meaning. Similar to other participants, she expects her potential secret keeper not to spread her private information. In our conversation Isabelle makes clear that, “Obviously trusting a person to not expose your secret to others is an issue.” When Isabelle says that she needs to trust a person to share a secret, she also means that this person will support and not reject her. In other words, for her, being sure that the secret keeper will be there to back her and to help her is very important. Isabelle gives an example that describes her expectations of the person she trusts: “My expectations, especially with my mom, are that no matter what I tell her that she should never stop loving me, and accepting me as her daughter.” I note some insecurity in her words, mixed with great love for her mother. The insecurity is expressed through her desire to have a “safe harbor” where she is always welcomed, loved, comforted, forgiven, and accepted – her mother. I relate to this desire. For me personally, the love of my mother means more than anyone or anything. I can perfectly understand Isabelle.

Coming to understand my co-researchers’ meanings for the notion of “trust” was interesting and insightful for me. Through our conversations I have been trying to shape

my own meaning of “trust,” which used to be very vague, and changeable with regard to different situations. I used to feel that there are no perfect people whom I can trust, but I could not explain why I felt that way. I instinctively knew that I should not disclose everything about myself, without regard to whom. The research conversations have helped me vocalize what “trust” means to me: now I know what I am looking for in a person with whom I am planning to share my secret. That person must always keep my information secret, must not share it further, must not discuss it with anyone, and must totally support me, never ask questions, not blame me, and not judge me. I am not an idealist; I do not believe there are people like that. Though it sounds sarcastic, for me a good secret keeper is a dead secret keeper. My conversations with my co-researchers were beneficial for me; I understood their points of view and their meanings for “trust.” These women were satisfied with their interpretation of “trust,” and they have helped me become more satisfied with mine.

4.2 Theme 2: “What will your reaction be?”

My co-researchers note two main reasons why they try to evaluate each person before disclosure. One reason is concern about their own comfort, and the second is concern about their secret keepers’ comfort. Isabelle cares about her own peace of mind and looks for people who will give her positive feedback; she wants her secret keeper to show support and empathy. However, Demi is a person who puts effort into satisfying everyone around her, and who seeks to satisfy her own needs without burdening others. In other words, though Demi needs to hear approval and support, she also thinks about her potential secret keeper’s needs. In our conversation she reveals that she has to be

empathetic to her potential secret keepers because she does not want her disclosure to create depression, or make them feel angry or guilty. Demi cares about the peace of mind of her secret keepers, while at the same time she cares about her own image – she does not want herself associated with negative feelings such as anger or sadness.

Jaclyn is the only participant who does not care about and has never practiced predicting possible feedback. In the process of secret sharing she does not go through a stage where she tries to analyze the potential secret keeper. She is a straightforward person, and with regard to serious issues she is less flexible. For her, the essence of disclosure is the act of disclosure itself; the reaction of the other individual is of secondary importance. She explains her point of view: “I never analyze how people will react or I never try to predict what their respond is. No, no. No, I never do that, and I told you if I trust people I really want to tell them, but I cannot control that, things are changing, because I don’t know him or her.” Linda’s ideas on trying to predict possible reaction are narrowed to the choice of whether it is appropriate for someone to know her private information or not. Her concern is protecting her privacy boundaries.

Most of my co-researchers think first about what kind of reaction they want to get, and on this basis they choose a potential secret keeper: If they need advice, they go to one person; if they need sympathy and support, they go to another person, etc. The only exception is Sonya. She agrees to place herself in an unfavorable light and does not care about the negative reaction her words can create. For her, the well being of her husband or close friend is more important than maintaining “face.” As she notes in our conversation, sometimes she knows that her disclosures will create a negative reaction,

but for the sake of healthy and sincere relationships, and the well being of those close to her, she puts herself in a bad position. This “tough love” is an understandable choice in a relationship; whether a friendship or a romantic relationship, being honest is important, although it is not necessarily the only consideration.

Petronio (2002) notes that every time one makes a decision about secret sharing, criteria regarding risk and benefit play an important role: “Because there is a potential for vulnerability, the consequences of telling or not telling are essential in formulating the access and protection rules people use to manage their privacy boundary” (p. 26). All my co-researchers but Jaclyn revealed that before disclosing they try to predict how their possible secret keepers might react to their words. My participants analyze potential secret keepers because there is a high risk of being misunderstood and misjudged. To avoid negative and unpleasant situations, some of these women observe possible secret keepers to make sure that they will get positive feedback and constructive criticism when they disclose their secrets.

4.3 Theme 3: “What am I getting from disclosing to you?”

Each of my co-researchers indicates she benefited in one way or another from self-disclosing. There were cases when my participants regretted sharing their secrets because they were betrayed, or shared to the “wrong” person, but usually the result of sharing was positive. The women note that they were expecting to get relief, advice, recognition, an opinion from the opposite side, or just unburden themselves of their secrets. My co-researchers use secrets as a tool for socializing. For example, Demi notes that secret sharing helps to develop a relationship, or make a friendship stronger. Linda

believes that secret sharing tests the relationship, because sometimes people cannot handle her information. All my co-researchers believe that the situations before and after sharing a secret are different. It is obvious that secret sharing changes relationships, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

All the women note that they want to be listened to and supported. As their secrets usually have a negative nature, my co-researchers want to talk to the people close to them to get relief and words of support. During the secret sharing, these women understand that they are revealing their vulnerable places, and they want to be cared for. In these moments, knowing that somebody is there to support them is very important. In other cases when my co-researchers experience strong needs to talk about a secret, they expect that the secret keeper will be a sensitive listener.

During our conversations, each woman also shared their experience of the positive effects of secret sharing. Demi says that secret sharing is therapeutic for her; she feels better after secret sharing. Isabelle notes that when she has “A big thing [secret] inside, it always comes out, I am just getting upset, getting crying, trying to let it out.” She becomes anxious, the secret becomes a major aspect of her life, and she needs to share it. Isabelle is also expecting support and to get advice on how she can fix or solve the problem. Sonya has the same point of view: she is expecting approval and non-judgmental words, but she is also glad to get constructive criticism. Sometimes when she does not know how to react given the nature of the secret, she expects those close to her to help her understand the situation and find the best way to resolve it. Like other participants, Sonya wants to feel that others are there for her; she needs to get support and

advice, and to be heard. Moreover, Jaclyn is ready to tell her secret to a total stranger because she experiences an emergent need to talk and to have someone listen to her. She knows and understands that in that kind of situation the stranger cannot give advice or input because s/he does not know the secret owner, but Jaclyn still thinks that in emergency cases, when she needs to release her emotions, it is okay to share this information with a stranger. I see a kind of “consumer approach” regarding the stranger: all Jaclyn needs is pair of ears and a nodding head.

My co-researchers described many positive consequences of secret sharing, and only two negative ones: betrayal and destroyed relationship. For these women the positive result is worth the risk of getting a negative reaction. They believe that having a secret destroys one’s peace of mind, and that as soon as they let it out, their peace of mind will return. My co-researchers have benefited from their experiences in sharing secrets. Even if they were betrayed and their information was used against them, as in Sonya’s and Linda’s cases, they learned from experience in that they now have a more refined approach to making decisions when choosing a person with whom they want to share a secret. I also agree with Demi that secret sharing helps to develop or maintain relationships; I am sure I might be much closer to my mother if I could find the courage to share my secrets with her. Fear and risk of being misunderstood stops me from disclosing. I am impressed with my co-researchers’ ability to make these decisions and to be able to handle the consequences.

4.4 Summary

During the research, I noticed one important issue that totally changed my own understanding of secrets and secrecy. I came to understand that it is one's uniqueness as a person, not the nature of a secret, that influences how one makes the decision not only about whether or not one will share a secret, but also about with whom one will share it. I noted that some participants, such as Demi, use their secrets, which are usually negative and represent them in a bad light, to create a social net, or to develop and maintain relationships with friends or significant others. Persons such as me, on the other hand, keep secrets inside where they destroy the soul and one's peace of mind. They do not have courage to share their secrets, or to let the secrets go; they enjoy suffering from them.

When I began my research almost a year ago, I thought that sharing secrets was a weakness. Now I believe that keeping secrets is a weakness. It is a fear of taking responsibility for the consequences, and I am afraid of facing those consequences. I prefer to keep my secrets, and be constantly in a bad mood because my secrets destroy my peace of mind. However, at the same time, I have also become aware ^{that} ~~the~~ perceiving secret sharing as strength or a weakness is problematic, because secret sharing is dialectical. For woman who has been raped, speaking about her devastating experience requires courage and strength. The woman knows that sharing her secret will make her live the rape again, but she still shares that personal information, hoping to gain support from others, to come to terms with the event, or so that others can derive a lesson from her experience.

My study shows that secrecy involves the dialectic of revealing and concealing, as in Petronio's (2002) and Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) theories. Whenever my co-researchers reveal their information, still they keep it secret. The dialectical tension is apparent in my co-researchers' narratives in that all of them practice selective self-disclosure. None of my co-researchers reveals her whole secret. My co-researchers not only make decisions about with whom to share their secrets, but also about which parts of their secrets to reveal. For example, Demi cares a lot about whether her close friends will judge her, so she does not reveal a secret or part of a secret that can lead to such judgment. Linda does not reveal information to a person who she thinks cannot handle it. Sonya prefers to keep some of her secrets, even though she knows that this concealment might be interpreted as lying.

My research has also led me to a new understanding of the concept of secrets. I think that the word "secret" does not represent the true nature of an issue that is going to be shared or has already been shared. More specifically, a secret loses its nature as a secret at the point one is thinking, processing, and making a decision to share it, rather than at the point one is actually narrating the secret. Many things change the meaning one sees in a secret. Time is a factor because over time people get insights and re-evaluate the nature of a secret. In some cases, people do not want to put themselves into a bad position, so sharing a secret becomes selective. Others prefer to deny the existence of painful memories that arise from what they are holding secret.

The word "secret" is problematic for describing all these processes. The moment one begins to think about a secret the original meaning of the secret begins to change.

The nature of a secret is constantly re-constructed, either intentionally or unintentionally. Intentionally or unintentionally, the meaning of a secret is constantly being constructed. Intentional change occurs because once the secret owner begins to process the secret, it is no longer the same information it was originally; now it is a piece of information that has been modified and changed by its owner for the sake of their own or other's interests. For example, owners of a secret will change its nature if they want to be seen as a "hero" or "victim." There are cases when people try to be maximally fair to themselves and to others and try to minimize intentional change of the nature of the secret, however, changed meaning is unavoidable.

Unintentional change of a secret occurs because of an individual's cultural background and constant intracommunication. Persons are all born into a culture that influences their attitudes, beliefs, and values. What is considered a secret for a person from one culture is a mundane thing for an individual from another culture. For instance, out-of-marriage sexual relationships are kept secret in Muslim countries, while for Western cultures such sexual relationships are a mundane and considered normal and healthy. For Muslims, these relationships are not only one of the biggest sins, but also a taboo topic with others besides one's official spouse. For Western cultures pre-marital and out-of-marriage sex seems to be an issue of discussion with friends.

4.5 Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. One of the biggest limitations is that although this study was conducted in the U.S.A., and three of my informants are U.S. Americans, I am from a non-American culture. My Eastern and Muslim background

influence me as a research tool. Though I have spent over two years in the USA, this period of time has not been enough to become as familiar with U.S. American culture as I would like. My own experience is that there are important differences between Americans and Azerbaijanis in the ways they communicate. On the other hand, the differences in experience and cultural background which I bring to this study as the research tool provide the potential for interpretations of lived experience that might not be open to a researcher raised in the U.S. American culture.

I also need to engage the experiencing of a larger group of women to more fully understand this phenomenon, and secret sharing needs to be examined both from the male perspective, and from the perspectives of other cultural groups. Although the goal of Human Science research is not generalizing to a population, my research suggests that this phenomenon is complex, multi-faceted, and cultural. One additional limitation of my research stemmed from my informing my co-researchers that I was not interested in the nature of their secrets. As a consequence, these women usually did not disclose the nature of their secrets, which made the conversation somewhat difficult. Talking about secrets without mentioning the nature of secrets was not comfortable for them, and may have restricted their ability to share their lived experience with me.

4.6. Future research

The area of secrecy and secret sharing has not been extensively researched in the discipline of Communication. There are many studies of self-disclosure, but few about secrecy. The sources that I found were useful in creating a foundation for my study and giving me a departure point. Further research is needed regarding how individuals

themselves classify what is and what is not a secret. During this study I noticed that my co-researchers defined “secret” very differently. For example, some considered every little detail of their lives as “secret,” while others were very socially involved in an environment of total openness and revealing to each other all personal information. Exploring these extreme points of view, and the range of views in between, might be useful in understanding the nature of secrets. Another suggestion for further research is examining the long term consequences of secret sharing, as for example in seeking understanding of whether it is more important for individuals to get immediate advice and relief, and become emotionally stronger, or to try to deal with a secret by themselves and minimize all risks of betrayal, judgment, and other negative consequences of secret sharing.

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Appendix I

Informed Consent Form

Study Title: I have a secret. Choosing the persons to whom secrets are revealed.

IRB# _____

Data Approved _____

You are being asked to take part in a study about the secret sharing and choosing the persons to whom secrets are revealed. The goal of this study is to understand the lived experience of participants in choosing to whom they can share a secret. You are being asked to take part in this study because you have life experience beyond college graduation. You are not being asked to share your secret with the researcher, only to share your point of view regarding choosing the right person to share with. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will be interviewed in an initial session of 1-2 hours. If appropriate and needed, an additional session will be arranged. The interview date and location will be your choice so that you feel most comfortable. The interviews will be audio recorded and kept in my own personal computer for the purpose of transcribing, analysis, and reporting for this study. My thesis advisor, Dr. Robert B. Arundale and I will be the only persons allowed to access to the information. All information will be kept in secure files. Your name will not be used and you will not be asked to give your name on any form. You are assured that all your responses in this study will be confidential.

Your decision to take part in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time without any penalty to you. If you have questions now, feel free to ask me. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 474-1876 or via email at ftnsa@uaf.edu; or my thesis advisor, Dr. Robert B. Arundale at 474-6799 or via email at ffrba@uaf.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

Print Name

Signature of Research Participant & Date

Appendix II

My research is focused on how people choose potential secret keepers and what kind of personal characteristics are important for them. For my research I will ask you to tell me how you choose potential secret keepers if you want to share your secret. For example, you have a secret and there are three possible candidates to share your secret with X, Y, and Z. Before sharing your secret to one of them you usually analyze these people: X is connected to me by blood (your mother, brother, etc.), but X is talkative, can I trust X? Y is my close friend, I trust Y, but who knows what can happen between us, should I trust Y? Z is my acquaintance and is a good listener, can give a nice advice. This kind of “analysis” can go on and on. But in the end you need to make decision and decide who is more suitable X, Y, or Z. I am interested what kind of your potential secret keeper (X, Y, or Z) was important to you.

I want to clarify what is considered as a “secret” in my research. The secrets you are going mention in the interviews should be connected to you personally. The secrets I am interested in can be from your life, about your personal relationships, your work, or any other aspect of your life. It cannot be overheard or overseen information, or other people’s secret.

The key issue if my research is that I am not interested in the nature of your secrets! Do not tell me your secret!

I will attach to this email Informed Consent Form so you can get familiar with it ahead of the interview. Remember that all information is confident and that the participation is voluntary. You can terminate participation in this study any time you wish, even after the interview.

Please contact me if you will have any questions about the procedure.